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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001700

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TAGS: MOPS PREL PGOV CASC GR

SUBJECT: GREECE: FIRES CONTINUE -- WILL KARAMANLIS CAMPAIGN CRASH & BURN?

REF: ATHENS 1687

Classified By: CHARGE TOM COUNTRYMAN. REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On Monday August 27, fires continued to burn in southern Greece, although the number had diminished from its weekend high. The death toll stood at 63; no Amcits are reportedly affected. Speculation continues on the cause of the large number of simultaneous blazes. Several individuals had been arrested and/or questioned, and both the GOG and a media magnate have offered large rewards for information leading to the arrest of culprits. Karamanlis briefed Greek President Papoulias, but did not suggest postponing elections. Mounting criticism of his government's response to the crisis means that Karamanlis is now in a real race for his political life. END SUMMARY.

EATH TOLL 63, FIRES STILL BURNING, AMCITS OKAY

¶2. (SBU) As of noon on Monday, August 27, the number of deaths from wildfires across Greece had reached 63. Some 40 fires continued burning, primarily in the Peloponnese and the island of Evia. Fires which had threatened ancient Olympia on August 26 were reportedly under control by August 27. PM Karamanlis continues interagency coordination from the Defense Ministry. While military resources were largely invisible in the first 24 hours of firefighting, press reports indicate that the Helleni armed forces have been mobilized at Karamanlis's request, to assist in both firefighting and evacuation of civilians.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy has had no reports of Amcits injured or displaced by the fires. We are, however, continuing our informal contacts with wardens in affected areas to determine safety of Amcit residents. (NOTE: These are informal contacts only. To correct information in Athens 1687, Embassy did not/not formally activate the warden system.)

¶4. (C) Embassy DATT has contacted CHOD Grapsis's staff, offering to request appropriate assistance from EUCOM. As of this writing, we have not received a response. (The GOG is likely still coordinating equipment donations from EU and others in the region.)

IS IT "TERRORISM?" CAUSE STILL UNKNOWN

¶5. (SBU) Speculation continues over what caused the large number of simultaneous fires. Several suspects have been arrested and questioned for suspected arson and/or criminal negligence. Minister of Public Order Polydoras used the term "asymmetrical threat" to describe the situation. The press has increased its coverage of law enforcement and intelligence activity (as well as military activity) to assist in policing. Media sources also pursued stories of a possible arson device connected to a mobile phone in a site near Athens, as well as a story of unidentified motorcyclists throwing flammable materials at a military installation in Athens' Agia Paraskevi suburb. Media report that the

government has established a one-million Euro reward for information leading to the arrest of arsonists; another million for the same purpose was announced by ALPHA TV owner Dimitris Kontominas.

¶6. (C) So far, few have suggested foreign involvement. But that may come. Leading daily Eleftheros Typos, in an article "Who Planned the Disaster?" suggested Turkey, Russia's rivals, and the Arabs. In northern Greece, one source claimed that the fires were the CIA's revenge for Greece's close ties to Russia.

WILL FIRES CAUSE KARAMANLIS'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN TO CRASH AND BURN?

¶7. (C) Karamanlis met with Greek President Papoulias on August 27. Media sources speculated that Karamanlis would use the meeting to postpone the elections currently scheduled for September 16. In the end, he did not; instead, he used the meeting to brief the President on the government's crisis management efforts. Economy Minister Alogoskoufis announced 22 measures to assist fire victims. These include 3,000 Euros for immediate needs and 10,000 Euros for the families of those killed. Deputy Minister of Economy Folias has left for Brussels to discuss further economic assistance with the EU. The GOG has also opened a Bank of Greece account for donations that will be used to support victims of the disaster. Several government hot-lines have been established for victims needing assistance.

¶8. (C) But both ND insiders and opposition PASOK recognize that Karamanlis is now vulnerable in a way he wasn't just one week ago. As the blazes are brought under control and the cost of the tragedy mounts, the media has turned from

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straight reporting to attacks on the ND government's competence. Victims are publicly recounting their stories in the press -- many homeless and stating they don't know where to turn. Critics have attacked Karamanlis's failure to immediately mobilize the armed forces throughout the country, as well as his failure to identify one person (in what is, during the pre-election period, a caretaker administration) to act as chief coordinator of the GOG's interagency response.

¶9. (C) Opposition party leaders, including Papandreu, have condemned Karamanlis's handling of the crisis. In the coming days, PASOK politicians will likely crisscross the affected areas, highlighting the plight of victims and proposing additional aid measures the ND government might take. Even ND politicians are wondering whether Karamanlis made the right decision by keeping elections on schedule. As noted reftel, much depends on Karamanlis's ability to convince voters that he did everything possible to respond effectively to the crisis.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

¶10. (C) Embassy will forward septel request for USDA/OFDA funding. In addition, Embassy suggests that the Secretary send official condolences regarding the fire and its associated deaths and destruction to FM Bakoyannis. The White House might also consider issuing a statement of condolence.

COUNTRYMAN